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Terrible to Identify

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TERRIBLE TO IDENTIFY

It's terrible to identify the dead
after a wreck, or after a battle.
But it's more terrible to identify them
when they are alive and moving,
or at seven p.m. in the sloping street.
When forgetting isn't around
and remembering won't come in its place.

Because eternity's decked out with eternity,
water dies in water
and rises from water,
clouds move only through clouds.
It's not so for men:
they have to move between
iron and stone
with nothing that loves them.

I had an uncle. With iron
in his body from the first
World War. It stayed there
till after the second.
And left when he died.
From the iron they made shells,
from my uncle new uncles,
a new way to forget.

Yehuda Amichai
translated from the Hebrew by
Shirley Kaufman and Nurit Orchan